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ABSTRACT

This speech discusses some of the general problems and traits of a poet and some of the particular poetry-related events in the life of this particular author. Brief descriptions of a poet's functions and creative energies are given, and the instant of knowing is defined as that particular moment when poets remember in a fresh, exciting way something they already knew. (TS)

THE INSTANT OF KNOWING

Josephine Jacobsen

A lecture delivered at the Library of Congress, May 7, 1973, by Josephine Jacobsen, Consultant in Poetry in English at the Library, 1971-73.

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THE INSTANT OF KNOWING

When I thought about this talk, I thought that tonight was the night on which I wanted to say whatever I knew about the nature of poetry; not the sum of what I know (whatever that may be), but its essence. The dangers attendant on being a poet and the dangers attendant on being Poetry Consultant are obviously close kin. I am neither so impertinent nor so naive as to work toward the definition of poetry, but I want to end tonight by telling a story, a true story, which implies as much of a definition as I have come by.

What seems to me the chief danger of the profession and of the job? A veering, a built-in tendency to jib—that perpetual tendency to veer from the core of the job, the core of the profession; that response to time and distraction pressures, or to attraction, which shakes the magnetic needle off center.

As I see it, the cause, the purpose, and the end of the position of Consultant in Poetry is poetry itself, as poetry itself is the poet's own job. There are so many good things which hover on the periphery: the setting, the methods, the supportive structure, human relations, social relations, the hope for lack of pomposity, availability to genuine need, the mastering of the shapes of time and effort. The center of everything is the poem. Nothing is important in comparison to that. Anything which in some valid way is not directly connected with that current of energy which is the poem is dispensable.

In the poet's own world, the distracting forces multiply. The poet, if he is a publishing professional, is instantly immersed in the morass of acceptance, rejection, publication, rankings, sales, status, lectures, readings. (And here I'm leaving quite out of consideration the whole academic scene in which most poets earn their livings in ways often only marginally connected with

the actual process of writing poems.) And sometimes it is as pathetic as it is alarming to see, in individual cases, how these considerations come to take on proportionately more importance than the poem itself. Sometimes indeed a scene degenerates into the metaphor of a bargain-counter sale where perspiring aspirants paw and grope for the bargain of success.

The Muse of poetry is a very fierce Muse indeed. I think of Stevens' image of the poem: "The lion sleeps in the sun. Its nose is on its paws. It can kill a man." That ferocity is more easily aroused by posturing, by hubris, than even by ineptitude, though in milder moments it does eat ineptitude alive. I wrote a few weeks ago a poem which I preferred to leave alone but which nagged me until it was written. It posited a group of self-admiring and mutually congratulatory poets, reading to each other in an ecstasy of false sensitivity which would rival that of Mme Verdurin, who are visited by the Muse whom they had lightly invoked.

The Poetry Consultant is dogged by the danger appropriate to each attempt. Is he or she tempted by the exhilaration of uncovering talent? Splendid. A flood washes all away. The only generalization in which I now totally believe is that every human creature in the United States of America writes—or has a friend, lover, or relative who writes—poetry. Does he or she give an interview? From far and near arrive touching and infuriating letters, explaining that ever since seeing the consultant's face reproduced in their local press (here they enclose a dim copy, indistinguishable as to sex or features), the undersigned knew at once that the consultant was tenderhearted, acute, compassionate, and active, living only to aid writers economically distressed and esthetically bypassed by a callous public. Does the consultant appear upon the stage, introducing a poet or poets? Letters rain like hail from other unpresented poets.

But these pressures, compared to the possibilities inherent in the job, are minor. There are graver pressures attendant on the act of poetry itself. Perhaps the gravest of all was mentioned and very briefly discussed here in this auditorium a few months ago during the Library's conference on teaching creative writing. This is the burden of the word as medium; the word in relation to paint, or notes, or marble. The word with its connotations. The word, above all, with its definitions. The word

frayed, debased, exploited, disfigured, and, most formidably of all, trapped in its dictionary. This is a challenge unequaled in any other art. John Ashbery, in his curriculum vitae when *The Tennis Court Oath* was published, elucidated the whole problem. He wrote: "What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities." Poetry makes its argument, to a lesser or greater degree, with the terms stated. Poetry names. If there is one thing it does, it is to name. It imposes identity. And it must name with words. John Barth, in one of his beautiful explosions, says this of the words with which the writer deals: ". . . words . . . as they come, or long since came: once-living creatures caught and fossiled in the clay; bones displaced by alien mineral, grown with crystals, hued with the oxides of old corrosion, heaved and worn and rearranged by the eons' ebb; shards; disjecta membra, from which the sleeping dragon is ever harder to infer."

And still the poet uses them to name. I would like to borrow a poem from my successor, Daniel Hoffman, which talks marvelously about this.

In the Beginning

On the jetty, our fingers shading

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The naming of things, which is the poet's function, is not, like a science, progressive. It is circular, and each passage of the circle is unique. The process will also be, to whatever degree, a record of failure. There will be good poetry, and poorer poetry, and bad poetry, or rather stuff which is ersatz, which is not poetry at all. I have quoted before Auden's comment, "Poetry is not a horse race," and the difference between the poem the poet felt within his grasp when he began to translate it into writing and the poem he finally has on paper is so much sharper and more bitter than the difference between his written poem and a lesser poem, that no one can be said to have won. Anthony McNeill, the young Jamaican poet who read at the Library's conference on teaching creative writing said that perhaps the way in which a true poet is known is by his own sense of failure.

Great poems are innocent of neither ideas nor technique. But poetry which becomes ideas or techniques has diluted to the

danger point the process of poetry. As a poet advances in sophistication and technique, this danger dogs him.

Often the poet brings back very little from the instant of knowing. Sometimes—rarely—he brings back something which combines two worlds: something germane to what Yeats called "the artifice of eternity"—the made and the eternal. Such poetry may wear any mode: the august, the raucous, the witty, the tragic. Nothing could matter less. Poetry is energy, and it is poetic energy which is the source of that instant of knowing that the poet tries to name. The test for the true poetic energy which rouses Barth's sleeping dragon is, it seems to me, the only universal test which can be applied to poetry.

In the process of naming things, the poet is caught at once in the problem of naming his own time, the problem of what was called "relevancy" until that word's exhaustion gave everyone empathetic fatigue. In naming his own time, the poet may be one of those rare writers who reach community in a working solitude, though seldom in a personal one. Ionesco writes: "For solitude is not *separation* but *meditation*, and we know that social groups . . . are most often a collection of solitary human beings. No one ever talked of incommunicability at a time when men were able to isolate themselves; incommunicability and isolation are paradoxically the tragic themes of the modern world, where everything is done collectively. . . ." Ionesco asserts repeatedly that his urge toward solitude is caused by his deeply held belief that it is in their reflective solitude that men are most closely united. For the solitary writers, the group experience in the pursuit of their own work is a negative experience. They work alone; the poem's inception and execution is as secret as a film's development in a darkroom. They learn, ravenously, from their fellows, their betters, the great dead, their own guts; from talk, from print, by osmosis; but they are not, and can never be, group members. Most poets on the other hand, as John Ciardi pointed out here recently, at some phase of their working life as poet, have been part of a group, and these have the stimulation and reinforcement that fly like sparks from the contact with congenial minds with the same general approach, objectives, and dislikes. But groups can also generate groupthink—that curious amalgam which bounces back and forth, carrying always some measure of other-directed debris.

This, in its totality, isn't apt to apply to a group of poets, but neither is it irrelevant. The kind of conformity which sometimes waylays the poet is almost never—indeed, I can say never —conformity to the acknowledged and enormous pressures on the general public. The general public isn't, really, a reading public by nature, and the reading public isn't, really, a poetry-reading public. Nonconformism to the advertising mind is second nature to the poet. His danger from conformism comes from within the group or even within the poetic community. It is not hard for the poet to run counter to uninformed pressure; it is sometimes very hard indeed to hold a course which may temporarily steer him counter to the informal pressure of his peers' direction, though from time to time he may find himself under the necessity to do just that. His own daemon has got to say "yes"; after all the humility, and openness, and gratitude, it is his own daemon which must speak. If he has connected with the source of energy, his poetry will be alive, and intimately related to the most distant truth; if not, it is born dead, though it be as factually relevant as today's headlines.

The brief story I want to tell tonight is completely concerned with that energy and how it travels and the mysterious fact that certain words, in a certain arrangement and with a certain cadence, start up a chain reaction explained by nothing in the words themselves or in their content.

An interesting argument took place last Saturday, after I had spoken at the University of Maryland. After the speech, there was a panel discussion, and quite a hot controversy arose as to what degree of analysis of a poem is possible without destroying the life of the poem. A number of teachers in the audience felt that poems could be, and were, dismembered to the point of death on the operating table. Others held out, very stoutly indeed, for the belief that the more you studied the poem, the more it meant to you. I understand very well the first point of view, having some years ago had a class for teachers of poetry who had been so disheartened by the poetry analysis to which they themselves had been subjected as students, that they cordially disliked poetry and were now trying to learn to reapproach it, for the sake of their students and of themselves. On the other hand, it is obviously impossible to denigrate the joy and comprehension which come from a close textual reading.

It seems to me that the solution of the basic problem—as Robert Frost has pointed out—lies in acknowledging as the most important element that point of mystery which is the core of the poem, that untranslatable quasar which can never fully be put into the prose of exposition. Certain words, in a certain cadence.

"Ah sun-flower! weary of time, who countest the steps of the Sun." It would be impossible to find simpler or more daily words. Or "I have been one acquainted with the night." It is something which is not music and is not talk and is both; but what it does, every single time, is touch the nerve which knows. It is, literally, an instant of knowing—of something simultaneously strange and familiar; something already known but now discovered. (That wonderful word: dis-covered.)

Almost 30 years ago, on a rather cold autumn afternoon, my husband and I were exploring some of the small side roads in the northern mountains of New Hampshire. One such road went over the crest of a hill and past a small and thoroughly overgrown cemetery, which obviously hadn't been used in the past decade. We stopped the car, and got out, and started wandering around in the tall grass, reading some of the tombstones. Some of them were tilted at angles, and some had lost letters to the weather. They said all the usual things—"Beloved wife of . . ." "He giveth his beloved rest. . . ." A few said "Infant Son" or "Infant Daughter," and there were quite a lot of children. It was cold in the wind, and we started back to our car. Just before we got to the gate, which was rusted and rather lopsided, I saw a carving of a pair of clasped hands, on a leaning stone, and stooped down to look at the inscription. There was a woman's name but no relationship, and under the name and the date were carved two lines of poetry. They said:

It is a fearful thing to love
What Death can touch.

Eleven words, ten of them monosyllables. Immediately I thought, I know those lines; but I didn't, in the sense of placing them, and neither did my husband, though he had had exactly the same sense of recognition. They hung in my mind as though every hour they were going to place themselves. I quoted them a few times to people I thought might recognize them; always there was the same reaction: "Yes, I know that. . . ." But no one did.

A few months later I wrote a longish and unsatisfactory poem about a wartime cemetery, and in it I quoted the epitaph from the tombstone. The poem was published in the *Junior League Magazine*—a periodical over which I doubt poets tended to hang. Later, I forgot about the poem, and I never included it in a book. But I didn't forget the two lines I did not write; they were there.

About four or five years later, after an illness, I came home from the hospital and found some piled-up issues of *Commonweal*. Leafing through them, I noticed a review of a play which had just opened in New York, by a poet whose work had interested me when I saw his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Hogan's Goat*. The poet was William Alfred and the verse-play under review was his *Agamemnon*. The review, a very favorable one, after praising the poetry and the stature of the play, went on to say that the play reached its climax in Cassandra's cry, "It is a fearful thing to love what death can touch."

I don't think I have ever had such an eerie sensation. I kept reading the words over, waiting for them to change in some particular. Then I sat down, in a sort of superstitious panic, and wrote a letter to William Alfred, and asked him where he had gotten those two lines, as I had a special reason for wanting to know. He wrote back at once to say that evidently the copy of the published play which he had sent me hadn't arrived. It came in the next day, and there was a note in the front which said that Cassandra's cry, "It is a fearful thing to love what death can touch" was from a poem by Josephine Jacobsen and had been quoted to him by C. Page Smith, the historian.

A few weeks ago when I was preparing this lecture, I did what I have waited all these years to do—I wrote to William Alfred and asked him what, exactly, he remembered. This is what he wrote me, as new to me then as it is to you tonight:

> It was Columbus Day, 1950. C. Page Smith had arranged a trip under the aegis of Samuel Eliot Morison, to Plymouth, to look at where the Mayflower had first landed. Professor Morison had recently lost his wife. Part of the tour, on that gray cold day, was the graveyard . . . of the pilgrims, on a small hill above the harbor. As we looked out over the sea from that rise, Page told Professor Morison of that poem of yours and of the New Hampshire tombstone . . . it haunted me as it haunts me still.

Those 11 words, put together by an unknown human being, carved by someone's hand on a grassed-over tombstone, in a deserted New Hampshire graveyard, had struck—in a chain of energy, unbelievable but natural—into my mind, then into my poem; had extricated themselves from that inferior substance, and struck through the mind of another writer so forcefully that he had been compelled to speak them, to a poet-dramatist, who put them at the core of the poem which was his play; and the reviewer found them rising from that play to arrest him and put them, as the play's climax, onto the page of a magazine, later held by the person who had received their impact from the stone in the grass in the graveyard.

I think that the whole meaning of the instant of knowing lies in that circuit. A knowledge of what we already knew become for an instant so devastatingly fresh that it could be contained no more than a flash of lightning. The arrangement of the oldest human fact into certain special sounds, in a certain sequence. It is the thing which cannot be argued with. And I have always felt almost superstitious about the story, because it is such a complete one; it is, to me, of the essence of poetry. Whenever I hear someone trying to define poetry or hear myself working toward a definition, I think of that carved stone sending out its terrible energy to that nerve of knowledge in the hearer, the reader, which transmits it.

This is the live energy which keeps the mass from corruption: the venal poet who writes, the editor who publishes, the critic who analyses, the reader who reads. What that energy speaks to is our knowledge, but a dormant, denied-by-habit knowledge which is kindled to response in the rare instant.

That energy is the common quality which brings poets together: the well-known poets who walk into the Poetry Office from all over the world, the young poets who are just beginning to be sure of what they know, the Poetry Consultants who have been so different from one another but conveyors of this poetic energy. It is the kind of energy which burns away the debris. The Muse is not fond of decoration. The speech of a poet changes radically as time passes, as the poet himself changes; if not, some life has died.

Tonight, before I end, I am going to read three poems I have written over a long span of time about that energy, about its

lethal hostility to the ornamental or the simulated. One, a very early poem which I wrote many years ago, one, a poem I wrote five or six years ago, and one, a poem I wrote a few weeks ago. But I am going to read them in reverse order, because what I am interested in showing is not a development in one poet. What I want to show is that, though the mode of expression has changed (I certainly hope), the direction was always the same; that the poem's arc comes back to the same source.

The first poem I'm going to read, actually frightened me when I wrote it. It had been a sort of jest, a laughing at, mostly, myself, in an uncongenial scene familiar to every professional poet. But then I felt that I had raised a Fury. This poem is called "When the Five Prominent Poets."

When the five prominent poets

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The next poem, which I read once before on this stage, has to do with the freedom of that energy—its unpossessability.

The Poem Itself

From the ripe silence it exploded silently.

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The last poem is a very early and highly unsophisticated poem, and what interests me in reading it here is the persistence of the same conviction that the instant of knowing is undeniable, terrifying, and permanent.

Poet, When You Rhyme

Poet, when you rhyme lightly,

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